

Stakeholder Summary

More transparency needed in public policy program differentiation

Over the last decade, Canada has seen dramatic growth in the number of graduate programs in public policy and public administration. A new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) finds that while this proliferation is fundamentally good, there should be greater transparency in how such programs differentiate themselves and more effort to promote those differences to prospective students and employers.

Project description

The report explores what a public policy on public policy schools might look like for Ontario by examining the growth in such programs, whether the growth is desirable and what should be done to ensure that any future growth in Ontario is effective.

Public Policy on Public Policy Schools is based on an internet-based environmental scan of the core components of public policy programs across Canada, including credential offered, program duration, required courses, language of instruction, availability of joint programs, part-time studies and work-integrated learning, and whether the program is thesis and/or major research paper-based. A literature review focused on the analysis and development of public policy and public administration. Interviews were conducted with university administrators and with directors of programs and schools of public policy.

Findings

The differences in Ontario university public policy programs are subtle but significant and they need to be articulated and emphasized to prospective students and employers. The degrees should be indicative of these differences and there should not be uncontrolled duplication, says report author Mel Cappe. The programs and schools should also promote the points of convergence and divergence, while the government and relevant organizations should clarify differences and promote greater understanding of the various strengths and weaknesses of each program.

According to the report, there is no indication that concentrating programming in a few centres of excellence would improve output. "Rather, the experimentation in program design and the continuing evolution of the discipline would argue for more, not fewer, schools and programs," says Cappe.

However, the report also calls for a standard for core learnings and competencies across all programs as well as accreditation for granting policy degrees. Cappe suggests that Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities might best fulfill this role. "If one body were able to rate and accredit all such programs and hold them to a consistent standard then students would be able to choose among them and employers choose among the graduates with lower marginal information costs," he says.

Anticipating new issues as the discipline evolves and programs grow and mature, Cappe recommends that the schools be reviewed again in 10 years.

Mel Cappe, author of *Public Policy on Public Policy Schools*, is a professor in the School of Public Policy and Governance, University of Toronto.